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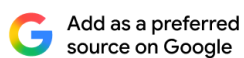
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Solidarity AI and the choices facing Thailand

Time for a public-interest approach to digital infrastructure, says the Platform Cooperativism Consortium

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Artificial intelligence does not exist only as software. It rests on data centres, electricity, chips, cables, labour and institutions.

A lithium-ion battery fire at South Korea's National Information Resources Service data centre in Daejeon on Sept 26, 2025, exposed how deeply modern life depends on physical infrastructure. The blaze burned for nearly a full day, destroyed almost 100 government digital services and administrative record systems and disrupted hundreds more.

Recent attacks on energy infrastructure in the Middle East have reinforced the same lesson. Artificial intelligence does not exist only as software. It rests on data centres, electricity, chips, cables, labour and

institutions. Put simply, AI is a human-built system that uses data to recognise patterns, generate content, classify information, make predictions and support decisions.

Yet public discussion often treats AI as something almost ethereal: detached from cables, warehouses, workers and power grids. Even the arguments around it, whether celebratory or critical, are still shaped by a relatively small circle of executives, journalists, policymakers and scholars clustered in the United States and Europe, who largely determine which questions get asked and which realities remain peripheral.

They tend to frame AI as a story of innovation, investment and global competition, or else as a debate about safety, bias and regulation. Those concerns surely matter. But they do not fully capture how AI operates in Southeast Asia, where questions of labour, language and infrastructural dependency are more immediate.

DISTURBING REALITY

Behind the headlines lies a different reality, shaped by invisible labour, concentrated power and inequality. Across outsourcing hubs such as Manila, Nairobi and Hyderabad, thousands of workers review disturbing content to train and maintain AI systems. Reports have documented depression, trauma, low pay and limited support.

A 2025 investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and The Guardian documented depression, insomnia, self-harm and a suicide attempt among low-paid moderators reviewing disturbing content for Meta platforms in Ghana. The case points to a broader pattern in which layers of subcontracting shift risk downward, even as decision-making and financial gains remain concentrated at the top.

Much of today's AI ecosystem operates through what can be understood as an "extraction stack": a vertically integrated system spanning mineral resources, data centres, algorithms, labour and applications. A small number of American tech companies control this stack, determining how technologies are built, governed and deployed.

Efforts to regulate these systems through ethical guidelines and policy frameworks matter, but they often leave the deeper issue untouched: ownership.

Who owns the infrastructure, governs the data and benefits from the value created? What long-term dependencies arise when countries rely on a handful of external providers for computing power, cloud services and core models? And when governments invest heavily in digital infrastructure, what other priorities may be deferred, including elder care and public education?

Without addressing those questions, the underlying system still rewards scale, efficiency and market concentration, narrowing the choices available to governments later on.

A solidarity ecosystem for AI is beginning to emerge, in which public institutions, cooperatives and civic solidarity economy organisations build shared infrastructure and more democratic forms of governance. It treats AI as a set of institutional choices shaped by labour, social knowledge and public priorities.

A practical example is the Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network in the UK, where local authorities are developing a values-driven AI framework with governance tools and public-service applications rooted in participation, accountability and democratic oversight.

Across Asia, countries are answering these questions in different ways. Vietnam is building national data infrastructure as part of a broader push for digital sovereignty. Singapore, meanwhile, offers a more regional model: its SEA-LION open-source system for Southeast Asian languages shows how public and research resources can serve the region rather than a single national market.

These efforts deserve attention, but they also raise a harder question. Is national control enough on its own? Or does resilience require shared regional infrastructure, public-interest standards and cross-border cooperation that reduces dependence without recreating concentration?

AI begins far from the screen. The minerals used in computing hardware are extracted under difficult conditions, while cloud infrastructure remains concentrated in the hands of a few providers. A single technical failure, commercial dispute or geopolitical shock can disrupt services across entire regions.

Alternative models are emerging, and for Thailand and its neighbours, cooperative and public-interest approaches to digital infrastructure suggest a more resilient alternative to dependence on a handful of firms. The region already has long traditions of cooperative organisation, and extending those principles into digital infrastructure could build greater resilience and control.

The question is not only who uses AI, but who shapes the conditions under which it operates, including data, labour and public debate? In Thailand, this is especially sensitive because digital systems are never only technical; they also influence what becomes visible, credible and punishable in public life.

As Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and her co-authors write: "Online smear campaigns legitimise severe penalties against activists, mobilising public endorsement of these legal actions." More broadly, digital infrastructure does not simply carry information. It also helps structure power.

SOCIAL PURPOSE

That is one reason the next stage of the AI discussion in Asia cannot focus only on adoption. It also has to address ownership, accountability and social purpose. Can AI serve farmers, workers, patients and local

communities, rather than making them more dependent on distant platforms? Can it strengthen linguistic diversity, public trust and democratic oversight rather than weaken them?

These questions will be taken up at the Solidarity AI conference at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok from Nov 12 to 15, 2026. The gathering will bring together researchers, AI developers, policymakers, union organisers, cooperative leaders and digital rights advocates from across Asia and beyond to consider how technology might be built with, by and for the communities it affects.

In that sense, the challenge for Thailand is not whether to engage with AI, but how to help shape a version of it that is grounded in the physical infrastructures on which modern life depends, accountable in its governance and resilient enough to serve the public when those systems fail, as they did in Daejeon.

Trebor Scholz, scholar-activist and founding director of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium

For more information and registration details for the Solidarity AI conference, see the Platform Cooperativism Consortium (PCC) website, <https://platform.coop/events/solidarity-ai/>

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